

Telepsychiatry connecting rural patients with needed care

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In an old Victorian home turned into office space in downtown Roanoke, cutting edge psychiatric services are being delivered that bring big city medicine to small town main street.

Through the use of telepsychiatry, Cheaha Regional Mental Health Center is collaborating with Birmingham's Hill Crest Hospital's resources to make them available to patients in rural Randolph County. And the impact is being seen in the significant numbers of patients now able to be served and sizable savings by avoiding costly hospitalizations.

Cyrilla Beveridge, coordinator of Randolph County Outpatient Clinic, noted that prior to this program's beginning in 2013, only three hours a month of psychiatric services could be provided. With almost 1,000 clients, officials had to schedule time months in advance.

Because of the lack of available services prior to this program, state hospitalizations were more commonplace--two to three a month. In the past six months with more patients being seen, there has only been one involuntary state hospitalization.

One year at a state hospital costs \$130,000 per patient, and the local program is driving significant savings. But more importantly, Beveridge pointed out, "Ethically, we don't want to send someone to the hospital when it is not absolutely necessary."

How it works

In an office just off the main entrance of the clinic, psychiatrist Dr. Birur appears on a large television screen. Seated at his desk at Hill Crest Behavioral Center in Birmingham, he talks directly to a patient in Roanoke seated with a nurse in front of the screen. They see him. He sees them--just as if they were in his office.

They talk about problems with medications, and the nurse takes copious notes. Dr. Birur talks about behavior and emotions with the patient, and they are just as at ease as they would be in a regular office setting.

"This is a very good way of imparting psychiatric services to people out in the community," he said. He sees a "very good volume of patients" every Thursday and two Friday afternoons a month via the television screen, and there is even a group therapy session. "It's running fantastic," Dr. Birur said. "There are very few hospitalizations. When a patient can see a psychiatrist and a therapist, it's very good service we are offering."

The program treats patients with major depression, bi-polar disorder, psychotic behavior, all kinds of

drug dependence and post traumatic stress disorder.

The impact

Beveridge is quick to label the program a success story. "We increased four times the time that we had" in the ability to see and treat patients. "We are fortunate to have Dr. Birur, one of the best psychiatrists I have ever worked with."

The program has been able to add more time. In addition to every Thursday from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m., two hours every other Friday are available as well. And outpatient substance abuse services are offered twice a week.

Additionally, a skills training group is offered weekly for individuals who are at high risk of decompensation and self-harm. Sixty percent of hospital beds are filled with those who are likely to hurt themselves--a cut, a burn or overdose. They have trouble with emotions, personality and behavior.

"We have been successful keeping these individuals out of the hospital," Beveridge said of the local program. They may often need medications adjusted. Having Dr. Birur on a weekly basis has proven "very successful in not having involuntary commitments to the state hospital."

She credits the working relationship of all involved as the driving force behind the program's success. "A huge piece of this is how we work together, engaging our clients," she said. As often as possible, family members are involved in the process for a more holistic approach to treatment. "We encourage them to attend."

A caseworker follows up with home visits for more serious, chronic conditions. "They're my eyes out there," Beveridge explained.

The clinic has developed a positive relationship with the community and its leaders. "They are supportive of what we do," Beveridge said. "We have become a hub for services." Before, Randolph County was a typical rural Alabama area that was underserved. Today, its citizens are getting the quality care they need right in their own backyard. "They are just glad that we're here."